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Tertia Vigilia

A journal of Russian Symbolist & early Silver-Age poetry and prose in translation

A Patriotic Poem by Sergei Gorodetsky

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Sergei Gorodetsky's "The Knight of the Air"

Translator's Note

While researching Russian First World War poetry, I came across a poem with the intriguing title "Knight of the Air" [Vozdushnyi vitiaz'] by Sergei Gorodetsky (1884-1976). This 1914 poem was written in memory of the pilot Petr Nesterov, who died in action when ramming an Austrian reconnaissance plane during the first weeks of the war. Nesterov's feat earned him posthumous glory in the first weeks of the war, and he gained a place in military history as the first man to employ aerial ramming in combat. Aerial ramming, for the uninitiated, means intentionally driving one's own plane into an enemy aircraft to bring it down. It obviously carries a high risk for the attacker, but it need not be a kamikaze assault. Nesterov did not intend this mission to be his last, but he died alongside the pilot he brought down.

Gorodetsky is not one of the big names in Russian modernism. While the thicker anthologies of the period sometimes devote a few pages to him, he plays second fiddle to giants such as Blok, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva. "Knight of the Air" is an accomplished poem, not a masterpiece. Racing along in lively anapests, the poem celebrates the pilot's victory with customary patriotic cliché and bemoans his death with fitting gravitas. However, what intrigues me about the poem is the use of an almost medieval idiom to describe one of the most modern deaths then imaginable.

The Russian word "vitiaz'" can be rendered loosely as "knight" in English. Perhaps the appearance of that term is not surprising, seeing one of the early Russian aircraft, built in 1913, was the "Russkii vitiaz'" (followed swiftly by the "Ilya Muromets", named for another folkloric hero!). The "vitiaz'" term has subsequently appeared in other modern military contexts: the Soviet special forces used it, and a modern sub-machine gun bears the name too. Gorodetsky's poem provides good material for exploring the attractions of such archaic nomenclature to us moderns. Indeed, his poem intentionally eschews contemporary vocabulary throughout. He turns Nesterov into a "winged warrior" who ascends, eagle-like, to the skies (his "natural element") before "swooping down" on the enemy. The bird imagery even recalls the avian motifs of The Lay of Igor's Campaign, an anonymous work from the Middle Ages often considered Russia's national epic.

By mythologizing Nesterov thus, Gorodetsky inscribes his name alongside the Russian martyrs of history and legend. Yet this approach also tones down the shocking strangeness and modernity of Nesterov's death, making order out of the chaos of the air war. Perhaps the poet does not seek to defamiliarize Nesterov's death so much as to domesticate it, to fit it into a heroic tradition that with which the audience can identify.

As Gorodetsky's poem is out of copyright, I've decided to have a stab at my own translation, which is reproduced below. The translation is inexact and often takes liberties. Some will find my attempts to replicate the poem's elevated diction and triple meter make for a rather twee English rendering, but, for me, these features show the poem's formal conservatism, which is at odds with its subject matter.

The Knight of the Air

In memory of Pyotr Nesterov

He ascended hence skyward, to airy blue heights,
Those skies seemed his natural home,
He defended our mother, our Russia beloved,
Protected her heavenly dome.

And while flying alone our winged warrior spied
Three enemy ships out to kill.
Now impassioned with courage, our hero sped on,
And reached them. The Earth fell still.

As he soared through the skies, bright-eyed as an eagle,
He keenly did study his prey.
Resolutely prepared to swoop down on the ship,
Then boldly he entered the fray.

In that moment of battle our hero did know
The vanquisher's fervent delight.
And the maiden, winged Victory, watched and rejoiced,
Admiring the skill of his flight.

Though the land has known war since the dawn of our age,
It gripped the Earth's skies only then.
Just as thunderstorms strike with their fiery wrath,
So struck this most fearless of men.

His assault was on target, the enemy down!
But strange are the workings of Fate.
In that same cruel battle, alas, all too soon,
Our hero did meet his own death.

Let us glorify now this fine knight of the sky,
Glorify all in the fight!
May they magnify Russia, both country and crown,
Forever increase Russia's might.

The immortal courage of these aquiline men
Shall fortify her, make her strong,
Shall allow her beneficence long to endure,
So let us chant victory's song.

We sing glory, sing glory to Russia's winged force!
Sing glory to stout-hearted men!
We sing glory to battle on high 'midst the clouds!
To air fighters, glory again!

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR:

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